

PRESS RELEASE

Algeria: Halt Assault on Fundamental Freedoms

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14 September 2023. The Algerian authorities should commit to end their attacks on civic space and allow independent organizations to operate without unreasonable restrictions as a UN official visits in September 2023, 15 human rights groups said today.

The United Nations special rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association, Clément Nyaletsossi Voule, is scheduled to visit from September 16 to 26. After the Algerian authorities postponed their invitation to the special rapporteur to visit nearly a year ago, the authorities have intensified their crackdown on fundamental freedoms, including freedom of association and assembly.

“The Algerian government is in the middle of a ruthless crackdown against the Algerian pro-democracy movement and anyone who is critical of the authorities. It is imperative that UN experts, supported by the international community, stand up for those fighting for human rights in the country,” said Nassera Dutour, President of the Coalition of Families of the Disappeared in Algeria.

The UN must realise the direness of the situation for human rights in Algeria

The visit of the UN special rapporteur provides a critical opportunity for the Algerian authorities to address these issues and demonstrate that their invitation is also a commitment to uphold their human rights obligations, the groups said. They should release all those imprisoned for their peaceful activism or expression, allow civil society organizations, trade unions and political parties to operate freely, and repeal repressive laws used to crush dissent.

The authorities have dissolved Algeria’s oldest human rights organization, the Algerian League for the Defense of Human Rights (Ligue Algérienne pour la défense des droits de l’Homme - LADDH), as well as a prominent association, Youth Action Rally (Rassemblement Actions Jeunesse - RAJ). At least two political parties, the Socialist Workers’ Party (Parti Socialiste des Travailleurs - PST) and the Democratic and Social Movement (le Mouvement Démocratique et Social - MDS) have been suspended, and two major independent media outlets, Radio M and Maghreb Emergent have been shut down, further silencing dissenting voices. Prominent journalist Ihsan El Kadi, sentenced to seven years in prison, senior analyst Raouf Farrah, and journalist Mustapha Bendjama, both sentenced to two years, were all imprisoned on dubious charges of “receiving foreign funds in order to commit public order offences.”

“The Algerian authorities have gone to extreme lengths to suppress critical voices and close civic space. Prior to the Special Rapporteur’s visit, Algeria should release all prisoners of conscience and cease all prosecutions of activists and human rights defenders based on the exercise of their legitimate rights,” said Aissa Rahmoune, Deputy president of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH).

Fundamental freedoms are no longer guaranteed by the authorities

Throughout the period following June 2021 legislative elections and leading up to the third anniversary of the pro-democracy Hirak protest movement in February 2022, harassment, intimidation, and attacks on dissidents escalated. Local organizations have reported that by the end of 2022, 280 activists and protesters were imprisoned for their involvement in the Hirak movement and on charges relating to the peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of expression, association, and assembly. Local organizations and individuals that monitor arbitrary arrests and detentions have also come under attack, including a human rights defender Zakaria Hannache who was sentenced in March 2023 in absentia to three years in prison on spurious charges of “spreading fake news,” “receiving funds” and “undermining state security and the integrity of the national territory”.

“Civic space has been throttled so severely by Algerian authorities that even the limited freedoms acquired since the nineties have been erased. The authorities should urgently reverse course and respect the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly,” said Ziad Abdeltawab, Deputy Director at the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies.

Between 2020 and 2023, several new laws were added to Algeria’s already repressive legal arsenal to stifle freedom of association and assembly. For example, the Penal Code was amended to include an article providing for up to 14 years in prison for an organization or association that receives foreign funds without authorization. Presidential Ordinance No. 21-08 of 2021 changed the definition of terrorism to criminalize actions aimed at changing the system of governance by unconstitutional means. In March 2023, a law on trade unions was adopted, intending to closely control trade union activity.

The signatory organizations draw the Special Rapporteur’s attention to the risk of harassment and intimidation of civil society activists he may meet during his visit to the country, and call on the Algerian authorities to guarantee their safety and integrity.

“Algerian authorities have escalated their control by dissolving civil society organizations and enacting restrictive laws to suppress dissent, thereby stifling any voice that rightfully advocates for the right to live in a democracy,” said Wadih Al Asmar, President of EuroMed Rights.

International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)

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